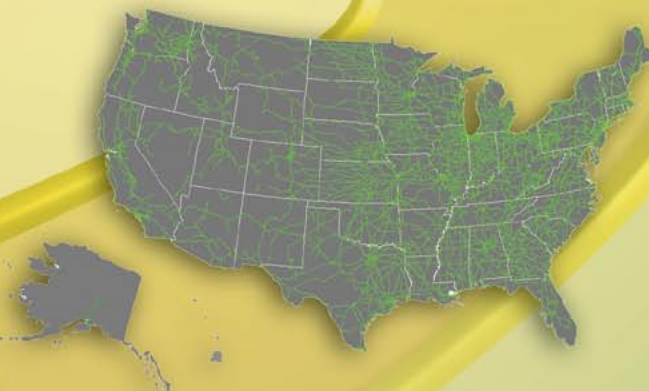


State Rail Planning Best Practices

November 2009



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF
STATE HIGHWAY AND
TRANSPORTATION OFFICIALS

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Reader's Note and Acknowledgements

This guidebook is the first of its kind—a concise resource to empower states with the information and strategy they need to develop effective and Federally-compliant state rail plans. The purpose of this guidebook is not to provide *all* the answers or to dictate formulaic approaches—but rather to serve as a resource to set the planning process on the correct trajectory to meet individual state needs. As future issues arise, AASHTO may provide updates to this guidebook and supporting materials, including a comprehensive list of existing state rail plans Internet links, on its website:

http://freight.transportation.org/rail_index.html

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) acknowledges the leadership of Standing Committee on Rail Transportation (SCORT) in sponsoring the development of this publication. AASHTO also recognizes the contributions and guidance of members of SCORT and input from the U.S. Department of Transportation, and railroad partners. This guidebook was created for the states by consultant Cambridge Systematics, Inc. under the direction of Donald B. Ludlow, AICP. We hope this guidebook will serve as a timely resource of maximum value to state rail planning efforts.



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Introduction

Interest in rail planning is reaching new heights as state departments of transportation (DOTs) across the country rush to qualify for new Federal grants authorized through the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act (PRIIA). This new wave of state rail planning activity builds on the recent momentum and leadership of several states that have developed compelling freight and passenger rail planning programs and investments. This guidebook, prepared under the direction of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials' (AASHTO) Standing Committee on Rail Transportation (SCORT), serves as flexible guidance to states launching state rail plans for the first time or for veteran programs looking to renew older plans with an eye to the future—and new funding.

The overarching goal of this guidebook is to help states produce PRIIA-compliant state rail plans customized to the unique circumstances of each state.

This guidebook provides a framework for developing comprehensive state rail plans, but it does not substitute for any forthcoming regulatory guidance from the U.S. Department of Transportation. PRIIA stipulates that the U.S. Secretary of Transportation “prescribe procedures for states to submit state rail plans for review under this title, including standardized format and data requirements.” Official Federal regulations are expected from the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) by October 2010 to meet the two-year limit contained in the law. Because this guidebook and more than a dozen new or updated state rail plans will be completed before the release of Federal regulations, it is the Standing Committee on Rail Transportation’s hope that FRA will incorporate lessons learned from the states into the published regulations. An open dialogue between the states, FRA, and the railroads will aid in accomplishing this objective.



Section 1—Background

Basic Components of a State Rail Plan

In its most basic form, a state rail plan articulates the existing and future role of freight and passenger rail within a state's multimodal transportation system. To effectively convey the role of rail to the consumers of a plan, the plan should establish a vision for rail; it should take stock of current and needed rail assets; and it should provide a clear path to implementing rail improvements. The following graphic summarizes the three core components of a state rail plan and serves as the framework for the guidance outlined in this book.

Core Components of a State Rail Plan

1. Vision, Goals, Objectives
 - To guide actions, programs, prioritization
 - Provide linkages to State Transportation Plan
2. Rail System Inventory and Assessment
 - System inventory
 - Performance assessment
 - Issues and opportunities
 - Identification of needs (current and future)
3. Planning for the Future
 - Prioritization of investments (economic, environmental, community factors)
 - Implementation plan (organizational, financial elements) integrated with other state transportation plans and priorities

National Perspectives: The State of State Rail Planning

Origins of State Rail Planning

Wide development of state rail plans began in the 1970s when—for the first time—Federal funding for rail became directly available to state DOTs through the Local Rail Service Assistance (LRSA) program. LRSA provided Federal dollars to help states support freight service on previously abandoned lines. States that self-funded Amtrak routes under the 403(b) program were further impelled to formalize statewide rail planning. However, LRSA was the greatest single catalyst to state rail planning, as the grants required states to develop plans meeting certain basic conditions. State rail planning continued under LRSA and subsequent amendments, including its 1989 reincarnation as the Local Freight Rail Assistance Act (LRFA). Congress stopped appropriating LRFA after 1994, but state rail planning continued at about the same level for two reasons. First,

some states continued to make passenger and freight investments independent of LRFA, using state or Federal money from other sources. Second, with the increased emphasis on statewide planning codified in three subsequent Federal surface transportation authorizing bills (ISTEA, TEA 21, and SAFETEA-LU), states continued to develop state rail plans as part of a comprehensive multimodal approach to transportation planning.

PRIIA

With the recent enactment of the Passenger Rail Infrastructure Investment Act (PRIIA), signed into law by President George W. Bush in October 2008, the nation is experiencing a surge in statewide rail planning as DOTs mobilize to become eligible for PRIIA funds. Like LRFA, PRIIA outlines a set of requirements for state rail plans that states must fulfill to become eligible for Intercity Passenger Rail Service Corridor Capital Assistance grants authorized in PRIIA.

Implications of PRIIA for Existing State Rail Plans

States with recently completed rail plans should not be overly concerned: according to PRIIA you will not have to immediately revise your work as your plan may be grandfathered. The following excerpt from PRIIA clarifies:

“State rail plans completed before the date of enactment of the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 that substantially meet the requirements of this chapter, as determined by the Secretary, shall be deemed by the Secretary to have met the requirements of this chapter.”

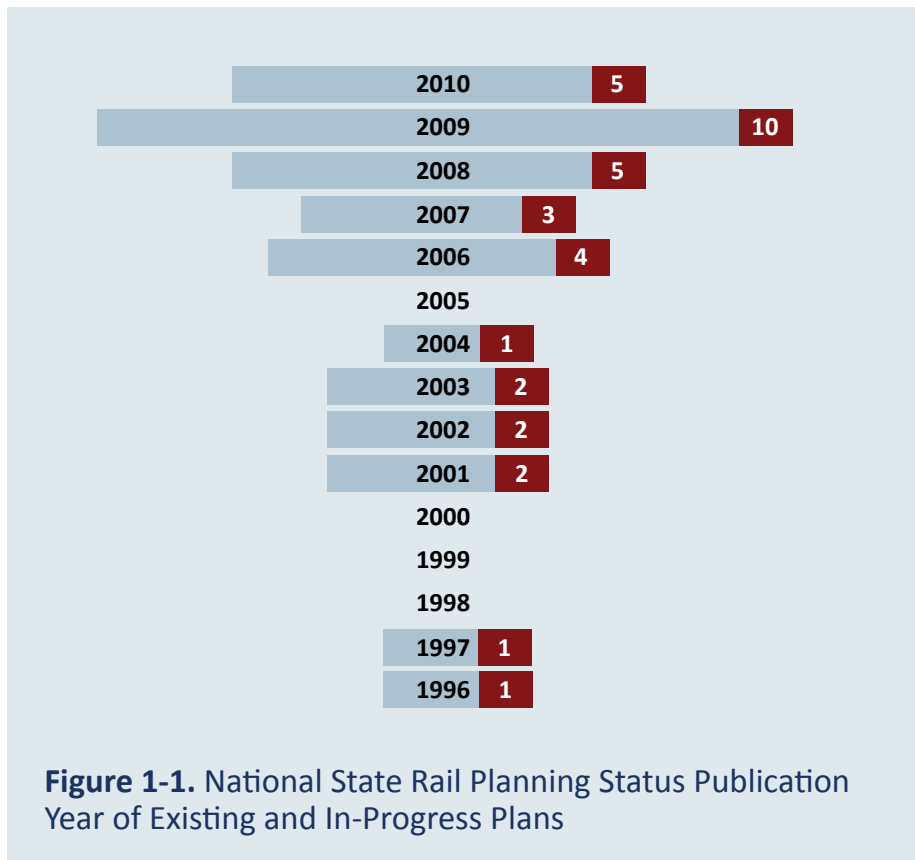
States applying for “economic stimulus” intercity capital grants appropriated through American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) have even greater leniency in meeting state rail planning requirements. This law directs the Secretary of Transportation to waive the requirement that projects have to be part of a state rail plan for grant funding consideration.

Current State Rail Planning Activities

Research for this guidebook reveals that 26 states have developed a “state rail plan.” This conclusion is based on the definition of a state rail plan as a formal stand-alone document, developed by a state, that addresses current and future needs for passenger and/or freight rail investment at a statewide level. Under this definition:

- 26 states have existing state rail plans, nine of which are currently updating their plans;
- 10 states are developing state rail plans for the first time; and
- by 2010, at least 36 states will have developed state rail plans.

Figure 1-1 illustrates the recent escalation of state rail planning activity. Each bar represents the scale of rail plan development by year of publication of states' most recent rail plans. This also includes the anticipated release date of existing plans undergoing updates and new plans that states are developing for the first time.



Rail Plan Consumers

Who reads state rail plans? In the past, the circle of rail plan consumers was limited to state DOT officials, the Federal Railroad Administration (if LRFA funds were requested), railroads, and other specialized interests. Today, more constituencies than ever are interested in rail planning and outcomes. These groups include at least the following:

- **The larger freight community**—including truck carriers and shippers—interested in new transportation capacity (not necessarily “highway” capacity) to develop more efficient multimodal supply chains.
- **Intercity leisure and business travelers** that travel by air, personal auto, motor coach, or rail to access recreation, family, or commercial opportunities. Disgruntled air travelers represent a growing segment of potential rail constituents.

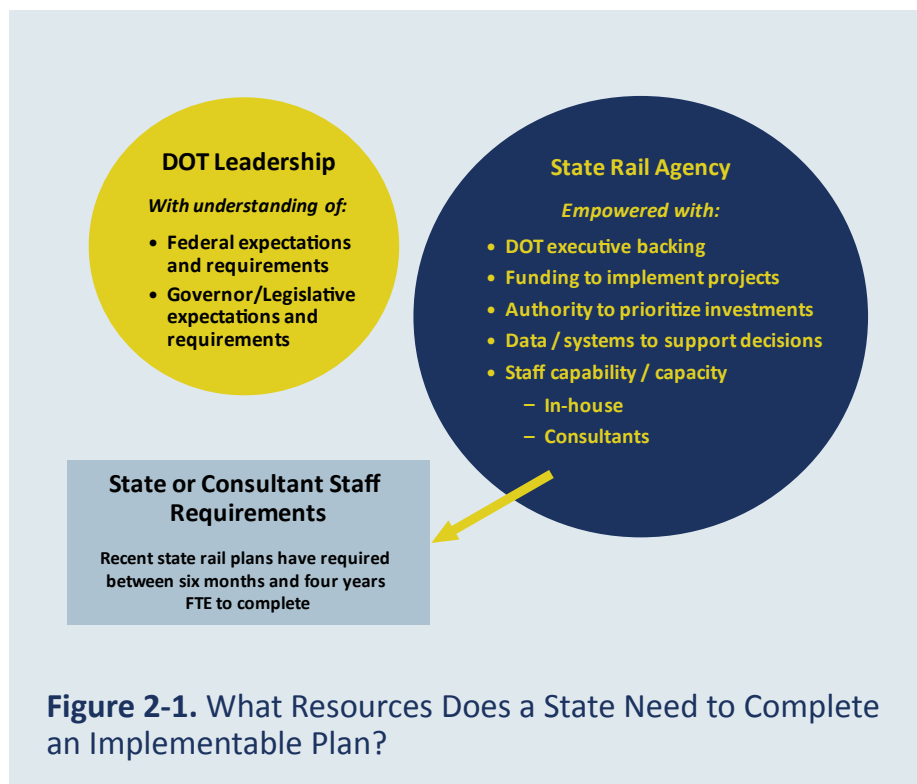
- **Local and regional governments** attempting to implement meaningful solutions to highway traffic congestion, trying to ameliorate the negative impacts of an auto-dependent society, and fostering economic development efforts.
- **Citizens, advocacy groups, and businesses** concerned about diverse issues ranging from climate change to bulk shipping rates. The increasingly organized and vocal groups in your state will be interested in how the rail plan treats their concerns.

Because each state faces different circumstances and rail issues, the developers of the rail plan should anticipate readers' interests and customize the organization of their final products accordingly. Regardless of who consumes the information, state rail plans should be easy to read. They should quickly and persuasively make the case for rail investment with compelling graphics and convincing prose. The final product should present the facts, maps, tables, and charts in a way that simply conveys the intended message. For most states, this message is that carefully planned rail investments have the potential to improve the quality of life of the states' residents by reducing highway congestion, cutting emissions, decreasing the costs of consumer goods, and providing mobility options.

Section 2—Rail Self Assessment

What Resources Do You Need to Complete the Plan?

As your state embarks on the process of developing a state rail plan, you should first ask a few questions to ascertain your readiness. Does your agency have the backing of the state DOT executive? Does the agency have sufficient personnel with the appropriate mix of expertise to complete the plan? What is the state's institutional history and knowledge of rail planning activities? Does the state have the data and tools necessary to support decision-making, including prioritization? These and other questions are critical as a state prepares to launch its state rail planning activities. Figure 2-1 summarizes some of the characteristics of state DOTs that have been successful in creating “implementable” state rail plans—meaning those plans that carry projects from concept to construction and operation. DOTs with a record of successful rail planning and implementation are those with rail-aware leadership, an empowered agency, and a mix of internal and external (consultant) knowledge. Financing is the other key ingredient and a major topic later in this guidebook.



Human Capital

As shown in Figure 2-1, one of the most important considerations is the time required—measured in full-time equivalent (FTE) employees—to complete the plan. Background research for this guidebook discovered a wide variation in the staffing expectations

among states, with the minimum level of effort at about six person-months up to the equivalent of four person-years for the more ambitious rail plans. Because PRIIA has effectively raised the level of effort for some states, the human resource estimate of at least six person-months may be too low. In the past, one constraint to plan preparation was funding. Under PRIIA, preparation of a state rail plan is an eligible capital expense. This means that some states may elect to either hire additional staff to assume this responsibility on a full-time basis or engage consultants in an ad hoc fashion to cover the ebbs and flows of the update cycle (required every five years to remain eligible for intercity passenger grant funding).

Rail Self Assessment

During the mobilization stage of rail plan development, your state will benefit from a self assessment—based on the suggestions of this section—to determine whether the state has sufficient personnel, analytical capability, institutional knowledge, and data to complete the plan. An effective way to assess your state’s rail planning readiness is by holding a session with key DOT stakeholders to determine the best approach for the state.

Self Assessment for Rail Plan Preparation

The state should identify the following:

- The degree to which the state has available the necessary human, data, and institutional resources to complete the plan;
- The gap—if any—between the available and necessary resources;
- Impediments that may inhibit the state’s ability to acquire the resources needed; and
- Strategies to put into place the people, data, and organizational structure to develop a state rail plan, including strategies to overcome potential impediments.

As part of this assessment, some states may want to explore the range of options for using in-house staff exclusively, relying on consultants, or a combination of both to develop the plan. Research for this guidebook provides information on recent deployment of internal versus external resources for state rail planning:

- Overall, states vary widely in the deployment mix of internal versus external resources.

- Of the 10 states in current or near-term development of state rail plans for the first time, at least five are completing the work using internal staff only, while the other half are using consultants for much of the heavy lifting.
- Out of the eight states currently updating their state rail plans, three are using in-house personnel, while five are utilizing consultants.

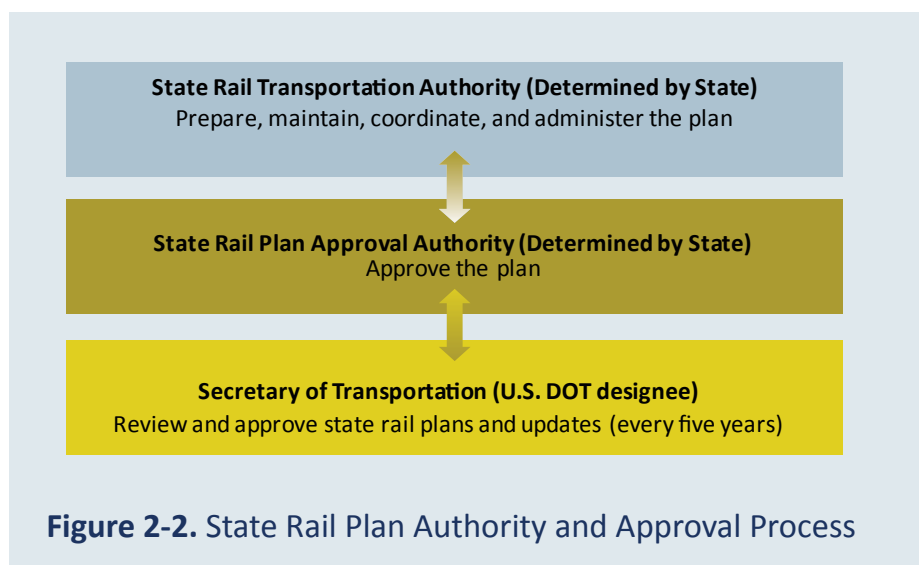
To assist states in making staffing and contractor decisions to support state rail planning activities, Table 2-1 provides a rough hierarchy that compares requisite and optional in-house capabilities. This table is designed to help states quickly assess their internal capabilities and determine the mix of in-house versus consultant support to develop the plan.

Table 2-1. In-House versus Consultant Capabilities Spectrum

In-House Capabilities Required	• Strong support, leadership, and engagement by agency head. • Agency project manager with understanding of statewide planning process, key stakeholders, and resources. • Statewide planning experience.
In-House Capabilities Preferred (Consultant Substitution Possible)	• Understanding of freight and passenger rail industry dynamics and issues. • Knowledge of the political and economic context or rail investments. • Understanding of policy and technical analysis steps, data, outcomes.
In-House or Consultant	• Completing the work: – Data collection, synthesis, analysis (e.g., ridership, waybill, GIS, etc.). – Outreach, interviews. – Policy development. – Performance measurement. – Prioritization. – Reporting.
Consultant Value-Added	• Experience in other states (best practices/ national perspective). • Specialized technical or policy expertise (e.g., benefit–cost analysis). • Ability to quickly deploy staff and resources in short timeframe.

Agency Support and Structure

If it has not done so already, the state should designate a “State Rail Transportation Authority” to prepare, maintain, coordinate, and administer the plan. The state should also designate a “State Rail Plan Approval Authority” to review and approve the plan before the state transmits it to the Federal agency designated by the U.S. Secretary of Transportation (presumably the Federal Railroad Administration [FRA]). In most states, the agency or division currently charged with rail or multimodal planning would be the logical choice for “State Rail Transportation Authority” designee. That same agency, or potentially the state DOT executive, could function as the “State Rail Plan Approval Authority.” Once your state completes its rail plan, the FRA will review and approve the initial plan and five-year updates to ensure continuous eligibility for intercity capital rail assistance. Figure 2-2 outlines the process.



Some state rail plans, including the most recent Florida Rail Plan (2006), outline the responsibilities of the rail authority (in the case of Florida, the “Rail Office”), to help readers recognize the public role in the rail planning process. States should consider developing a brief “authority” section to describe the state’s role, organization, and statutory requirements—Federal and state—for rail planning and the preparation of a state rail plan.

With the self-assessment completed and the lines of authority clarified, your agency is ready to move onto the next steps of developing a state rail plan, the first of which is to establish a process for coordination and outreach.

Section 3—Coordination and Outreach

During the start-up phase of rail planning, states should spend some time developing a strategy to coordinate internal agency resources and activities and to elicit external advice through a transparent outreach approach. The preceding section provided guidance focusing on the Federal-state institutional relationship. This section describes approaches to setting up the state rail plan supporting structure, including advisory groups and outreach activities.

Coordination

As your state advances its rail plan activities, it should develop strategies to coordinate with internal and external stakeholders on several different levels. Internal coordination mostly relates to activities that provide consistency across statewide transportation planning activities. These activities include planning activities led by the state DOT, such as the state transportation plan and modal plans. External coordination should pursue consistency or relevancy of the state's rail plan with activities and plans of private and public rail stakeholders. Figure 3-1 arrays potential “coordination” linkages your state should consider establishing as part of the state rail planning process.

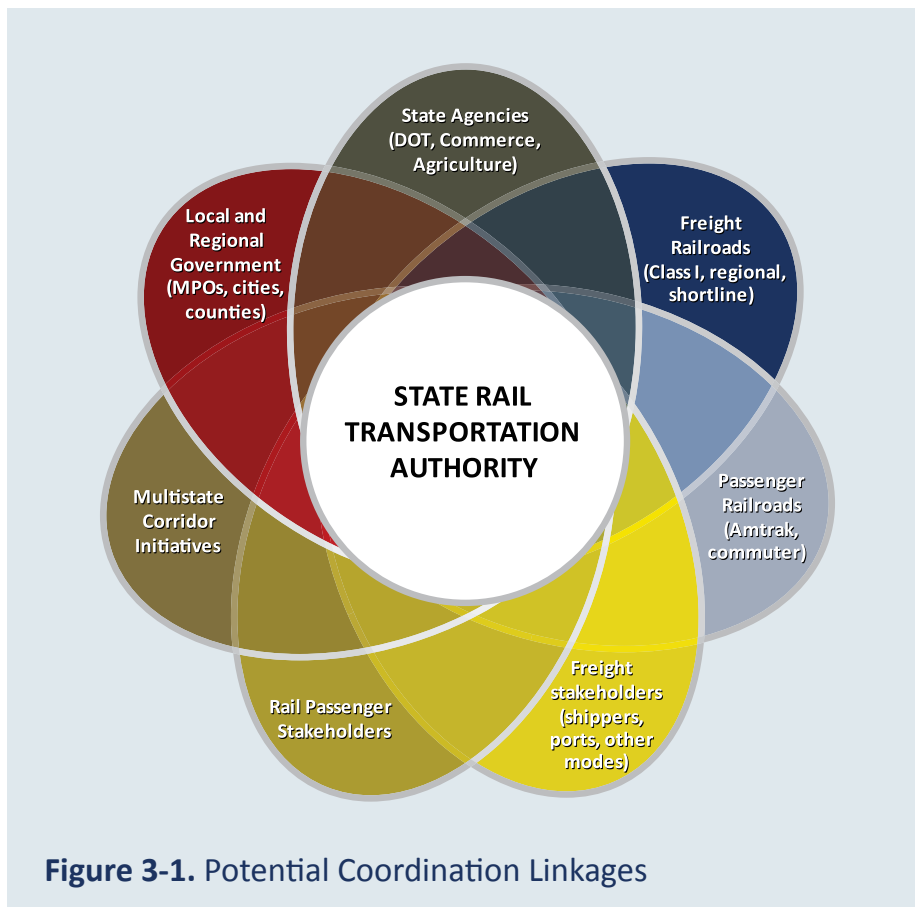
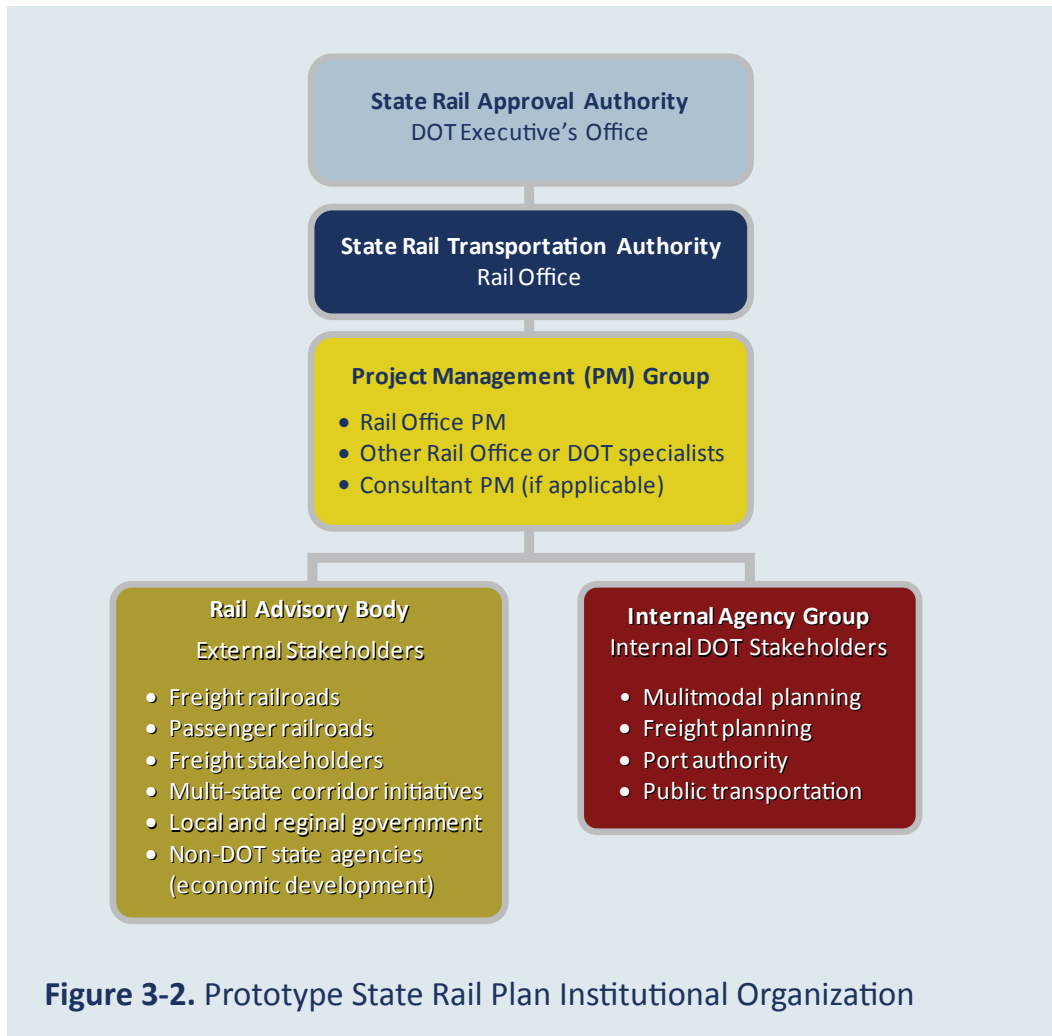


Figure 3-1. Potential Coordination Linkages

State Rail Plan Organizational Structure

To formalize these linkages, the state should devise an organizational structure to effectively manage the planning process. Figure 3-2 portrays a common organizational structure for state rail plan development, including the placement of a rail advisory body, which formalizes and solidifies the relationships with external groups.



Roles and Responsibilities

- **State Rail Transportation Authority**—The agency, typically within a state DOT, that oversees the rail or multimodal planning at a statewide level. This is the lead agency for the rail plan and provides the project management, oversight capacity, and editorial control over the plan.
- **State Rail Approval Authority**—The state-designated approval agency of state rail plans, likely the state DOT executive or potentially the same state Rail Transportation Authority.

- **Rail Advisory Body**—Provides external advice to the plan and serves as a venue to coordinate plans and policies affecting statewide rail operations originating outside the state DOT. This group offers nonbinding counsel but does not serve as the official approval agency for the final plan.
- **Internal Advisory Group**—Coordinates statewide multimodal transportation planning, priorities, and issues, including programming and financial planning.

Both the rail advisory body and the internal advisory group serve as coordination mechanisms to reconcile similar or divergent planning efforts to the statewide vision. PRIIA requires coordination of the state rail plan with state transportation planning goals and programs to set forth rail transportation's roles within the state's transportation system. Under the "Intergovernmental Coordination" section of PRIIA, states should also review freight and passenger service activities and initiatives by regional planning agencies, regional transportation authorities, and municipalities.

Figure 3-3 demonstrates the multidimensional and multimodal nature of state rail planning in the context of other transportation planning and programming activities and highlights the need for coordination.

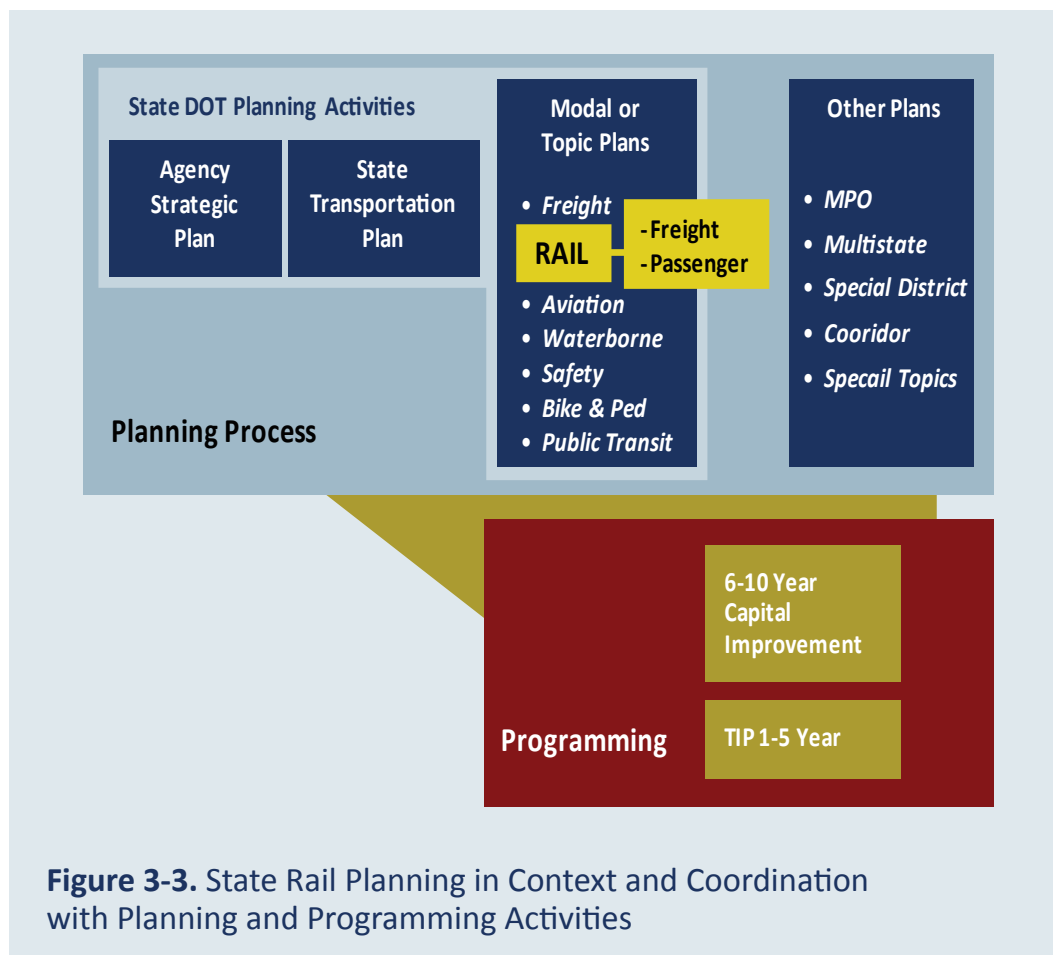


Figure 3-3. State Rail Planning in Context and Coordination with Planning and Programming Activities

Rail Advisory Body

The most time consuming yet important part of the rail plan structure is proper organization and maintenance of the external rail advisory body. If your state has already established a rail advisory group, you may want to revisit its membership composition and charter to confirm that it meets the needs of the state given your current situation. If you do not have a rail advisory body, your state will benefit throughout the planning process by setting up this group early. Ideally, the advisory body would counsel the state as it develops the plan and serve as a continuing resource to guide future activities, including plan updates and implementation. Some observed success factors for rail advisory bodies include the following:

- **Membership covers the assets and the issues.** Committee membership represents principal rail stakeholders, such as the private freight railroads that own the assets and passenger or commuter operators. The membership also corresponds to the important rail stakeholder issues, ranging from agricultural rail access to intercity rail advocacy.
- **Official appointment or invitation.** Either the governor or the DOT executive officially invite or appoint (if legislated) the members—sometimes with specified terms.
- **Clear responsibilities.** The state clearly delineates the responsibilities of the group, sometimes through legislation, or a facilitated session to establish a mission statement, roles, and responsibilities.
- **Meetings with meaning.** During the development of the rail plan, members meet at key milestones, including kickoff, to monitor progress and provide orientation. Before and after the planning activity, many rail advisory groups meet quarterly with set agendas seeking specific advice from the group.
- **Parallel structure.** High-ranking state officials attend or preside over the meetings to demonstrate the state’s commitment to and interest in rail and to correspond to the stature of the participating members, who are often executive-level in their respective organizations. The state acknowledges the time commitment of civic, business, or association leaders volunteering or appointed to the committee.

“The ultimate measure of rail planning success is creating effective partnerships that lead to implementation.”

– Karen Rae, New York State Department of Transportation

Table 3-1 provides some illustrative examples of three states’ rail advisory bodies. Oregon’s Rail Advisory Committee is longstanding while Tennessee’s is newly formed. In Wisconsin, a State Rail Industry and Shippers Advisory Group provides specialized guidance and complements the Wisconsin State Rail Advisory Committee.

Table 3-1. Illustrative Profiles of State Rail Planning Committees, Recent and Ongoing

Agency	Committee(s)	Composition
Wisconsin Department of Transportation	State Rail Advisory Committee	Class I Freight railroad (1); Short line railroad (1); Trade associations (3); Economic Development (3); Regional planning organizations (6); Waterborne port (1); County engineer (1); Native American tribe (1); Cities (3); State Agriculture Department (1); State Rail Commissioner (1); Labor union (1); Federal agency (1); University (1); Passenger rail (1); Transportation development association (1); Consultant (1). TOTAL 28
	State Rail Industry and Shippers Advisory Group	Freight railroads (6); Shippers (6); Amtrak (1); Utilities (1) TOTAL 14
Tennessee Department of Transportation	Rail System Plan Advisory Committee	Freight railroads (12); Shippers (12); Local government (15); state and Federal (9); Amtrak and passenger rail interests (7). TOTAL 55*
Oregon Department of Transportation	Rail Advisory Committee	Class I freight railroads (2); Labor union (1); Amtrak (1); rail passengers (2); Short line railroads (2); local governments (2); Port (1); Shippers (3). TOTAL 15

* "Rail advisory committee to assist TDOT." Blackwell, S. Nashville City Paper. February 28, 2009

Working with the Railroads

Implementation of state rail plans depends on successful and continuous collaboration between states and railroads. At the beginning of a state rail planning process, states should establish relationships built on mutual trust with the railroads operating within their boundaries. To do this, the state should reach out to its railroads to invite them to the planning table. During the course of interaction, states should keep the following in mind:

- Freight railroads are business ventures and their motivation to work with the state originates in the possibility of improved financial return.
- Freight railroads increasingly recognize their important role in meeting public goals, such as improved air quality. Projects and policies that simultaneously boost a railroad's bottom line and advance the public interest may merit greater energy and resources from the state during the planning process as railroads are more likely to reciprocate.

- The states and railroads (passenger and freight) may also find value in understanding each others' organizational structure and motivations. State rail planners should familiarize themselves with the corporate hierarchy of railroads and the departments or divisions that govern various aspects of the company that may impact the state. Railroad web sites provide basic information which states can supplement through direct discussions with the railroads.
- Transparency of motivations and resources can build trust and expedite the willingness of all parties to enter into partnerships.

Interacting with Rail Carriers

Table 3-2 illustrates common roles of railroad representatives in state rail planning in an attempt to help states better understand how to interface with rail carriers. This table is most representative of a Class I freight carrier but passenger, regional, and shortline carriers are often organized with many of the same personnel or divisions, adjusted to the scale of their operations.

Outreach

PRIIA requires states to provide “adequate and reasonable notice and opportunity for comment and other input to the public; rail carriers, commuter, and transit authorities operating in, or affected by rail operations within the state; units of local government; and other interested parties in the preparation and review of its state rail plan.” Ideally, much of the opportunity for comment and review with several of the stakeholders listed in PRIIA would take place through the rail advisory body mechanism. However, states clearly benefit from broader interaction with the public and rail stakeholders.

To accomplish the PRIIA outreach requirements and to build a successful outreach program, states should design an outreach approach that accomplishes the following broad goals:

- Educates the state’s citizens and rail stakeholders about the role of rail in a balanced transportation system;
- Collects and synthesizes comments from the public and rail stakeholder groups to assist in developing the vision, projects, prioritization, financing, and implementation.

Outreach Activities

The most common and effective outreach activities include interviews with key stakeholders, surveys, and public meetings. With increasing frequency, states utilize electronic media—including state rail plan web sites and on-line surveys—to reach a wider audience. States also commonly post rail plan documents, such as meeting notes and report drafts, on their web sites to draw responses from interested parties.

Table 3-2. Common Railroad Corporate Interface or State Rail Planning Activities

Corporate Division	Common Roles in State Rail Planning	Strengths and Skills
Government or Public Affairs	Most Class I railroads and Amtrak maintain regional or state-specific liaisons with legislative and/or public affairs responsibilities. Frequently these locally based representatives serve as the official points of contact for the railroad. For example, the railroad may appoint this person to represent the corporation on the rail plan advisory committee.	Political savvy and the ability to understand the media, legal, and other aspects of a project. Often serves as a gatekeeper to other disciplines and executive decision-makers.
Strategic Planning/ System Design	The railroads' "planners" typically work out of corporate headquarters and provide the type of analysis and forward thinking to the corporation that state rail planners provide to their state DOTs. The railroads may assign them—either in the place of or supplementing the government affairs—to represent the corporation during the state rail plan or study.	Technical know-how, often cultivated through decades of experience in railroad operations and planning. They are typically responsible for engineering and planning work, including simulation modeling.
Operations	At times, railroads will consult with their operations engineers to weigh a possibility or to understand system needs.	Supplements the knowledge of the strategic planning representatives with real-time knowledge of the current system and railroad function.
Marketing	The lead railroad liaison to the rail plan may engage their marketing divisions, which have responsibility for shipper accounts on either a geographic or commodity basis (e.g., Mexico or agriculture, respectively).	Provide specific knowledge of commodity flows and potential market opportunities for growth.
Business Units (e.g., intermodal)	Most railroads maintain specialized business units to operate, market, and plan for a specific subset of the business. Intermodal is the most common separate business unit.	Business units, such as intermodal, bring specialized knowledge of important sectors.
Real Estate	Real estate divisions often represent the railroads' real property and economic development interests in state or project rail plans.	These individuals often oversee terminal planning or special projects related to economic development.
Corporate Counsel	It is unlikely that a railroad's attorney will engage in state rail planning and more likely during project planning and implementation stages, especially where agreements (liability, operations, financing) are necessary.	Interpretation of rules and legal limitations of the railroad.

In general, outreach activities offer an opportunity to extend the same types of questions and dialogue the rail plan team might build with the Rail Advisory Group and other internal partners, but open to a larger group of rail users and the general public.

Interviews

Interviews with rail plan stakeholders allow the rail plan development team to collect specific information in an interactive back-and-forth format, providing more flexibility and information than a standard survey. However, because interviews can be a more expensive way of gathering information, your state may decide to limit the number of interviews conducted in-person to the key freight and passenger rail stakeholders. Instead, telephone interviews provide nearly as much data collection value. Compared to in-person interviews, the drawback of telephone interviews is their relative weakness in relationship-building that can be very important to long-term implementation.

Based on these observations, states may choose to develop two tiers of interviewees: in-person and telephone. The in-person interviews may include members of the advisory body that may want to provide more detailed information or critique directly to the rail plan team. The state might also consider live interviews with executives of private railroads, large rail shippers, public agencies, and advocacy groups to demonstrate the state's interest in the respective opinions of the owners and users of the rail system. Telephone interviews could reach other large rail shippers, terminals, or other groups identified by the state.

Two documents will guide the interview process. The first is an evolving list of potential interviewees divided into the in-person and telephone interview tiers. This list will grow, contract, and adapt over the course of the project. The second document is a rail interview guide customized to collect specific information—such as capital needs of rail carriers—and to offer general direction to the conversation. Appendix C contains a sample interview guide that states may customize to their needs.

Surveys

States are beginning to use web-based and targeted e-mail surveys to collect both specific and general information during the rail planning process. To collect general information from the public and stakeholders during the development of the most recent update of the Virginia State Rail Plan, the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (VDRPT) distributed a survey at its five statewide public meetings during summer 2008. The agency also posted the survey on its web site. VDRPT designed the survey to assess the usefulness and clarity of its plan and also sought insight from respondents on top project priorities and how to allocate money between freight and passenger rail.

Public Meetings

It is increasingly common for states to organize public meetings for state rail plans. In the future, public meetings will be an effective way of meeting PRIIA requirements to reach out to relevant stakeholders. During the past year, the states of Virginia, Florida, and New York have held public outreach events. These meetings often commence with a presentation by the state outlining some of the findings and directions of the plan to inspire thought and comment by attendees. The experience of the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) may hold interest and applicability to other states.

New York State Rail Plan—Public Meetings Summer 2008

During the summer of 2008, NYSDOT staged three well-attended stakeholder events in Buffalo, Binghamton, and Manhattan, respectively. NYSDOT scheduled four hours for each meeting, from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m., to allow a generous window for participants to fully discuss and vet issues. The meetings did not follow a set agenda, but instead provided a facilitated discussion to first identify the issues that are universally important to all the participants at the table and second, to make progress toward defining how NYSDOT should move forward.

Outreach Conclusions and Next Steps

Ultimately, information collected through outreach activities should inform the structure and outcome of the rail plan. As per PRIIA, states maintain editorial discretion on whether to react to certain comments or advice and can also decide whether to include comments in the final state rail plan version. The hope for outreach is to enrich the plan with outside vision, perspectives, and information, while establishing a lasting network of relationships that will continue to serve the state well.

